

A Water-spray Technique for Unique Bird Photography



BRIAN O'LEARY PHOTOGRAPHY

a proven method to attract large numbers of bird species for unique bird photography

I went to Mackay in 2010 at the invitation of a friend who had been telling me about the beautiful Olive-backed Sunbird, a bird I had never seen but would love to photograph. After watching the birds for a while I decided to set up a water hole, (this is my regular approach to bird photography), using the lid from a garbage bin and placing it amidst small stones on top of a milk crate. After observing the birds for some time, I picked an area where the Sunbirds and other birds regularly frequented.



Artificial water hole amidst rocks on top of a plastic milk crate



Artificial water hole, sprayer set-up and hide at Copeton Dam, NSW

I prefer not to have my water hole on the ground as looking down on the birds is not as pleasing photographically as having the birds level with the camera. I erected my hide and waited for the sunbirds whilst capturing good images of other birds that I had not photographed previously (e.g., Northern Fantail, Yellow Honeyeater and White-browed Robin), but I was not able to capture images of the sunbirds – they would not come to the water hole. After watching the sunbirds for some time, I noticed that they bathed on a few dewy leaves most mornings and so I used a small spray bottle to spray water on some of the leaves of the nearby vegetation.

The sunbirds came to these wet leaves and other birds came as well, enabling me to capture some interesting images. Since that first encounter, I have used a sprayer set-up often but I have upgraded the original system to that of an eight litre garden sprayer. I took the nozzle off the hand piece



Fairy Gerygone enjoying a shower of fine water droplets



A beautiful Olive-backed Sunbird attracted by the water spray

and replaced it with a five metre long plastic hose of suitable diameter and attached a plastic nozzle at the other end of the hose. Garden sprayer nozzles come in various sizes, each with their own particular water-jet pattern. The nozzle that works best for me delivers a very fine mist, sprays only a small area and does not use an excessive volume of water. I still use a water hole in combination with the sprayer, placing it near foliage that can be wet with the sprayer; this might be a fern, small gum trees, in fact any plant with leaves at the appropriate height. I place a stick in a convenient position and fix the spray nozzle to it, a little higher than the leaves so that the water-spray falls on both the foliage and on the water hole.

To remain concealed from the birds, I photograph from a hide, which is placed about four or five metres from the water hole and sprayer. I purchased my collapsible hide from an internet supplier. The type of collaps-



My modified 8L garden sprayer



Another image of an Olive-backed Sunbird enjoying a bath from the sprayer



A Fairy Gerygone flying through the water droplets pulsing from the spray-head

ible hide I selected was one of the light-weight pop-up models as they are cheap and I take two of these when I travel, one for my water hole and one as a spare. The advantage of being able to photograph in such close proximity to the water hole is that you don't require an expensive 500 or 600mm lens. The lens I use is an 80-400 zoom, which I find ideal as one never knows the size of bird that will be attracted to the water hole (e.g., it could be a crow or a small gerygone.) The spray bottle and hand piece are



Silvereye clinging the the stem of the spray-head

placed in the hide with me so that I can I pump pressure into the tank as required and using the hand-piece I release a spray of water for only ten seconds or so at a time, primarily when I see the leaves are beginning to dry-off or to attract a nearby bird that has come to the water hole. If I find I am using a lot of water I have several reserve bottles of water in the hide to top up the unit. I usually spend about an hour in the hide in the early

morning, and about an hour in the afternoon. I don't like to photograph in full sunlight and I favour overcast days or days with light rain, (as do the birds), as at these times the light is far more pleasing for photography.

When selecting a site for a water hole I position it where there is good cover for small birds as when the birds are wet their capacity to fly is diminished. My water hole at home is close to a dam but relying on a dam as a water attractant is limiting as many of the smaller bird species refuse



Crested Pigeon with a typical 'wing-up' bathing action

to fly across open areas to reach the water. Artificial water holes for photography can be quite small and improvised from any item that will hold or deliver water. This may be simply a dripping tap, or even holes in trees that hold water and if you find one of these tree-holes that is not too high for photography, you will capture great images. In the rainforest I look for root formations that hold water, observe the bird and if you are lucky the

birds will show you their watering points. Some species of birds that will not come to a water hole will come to the sprayed leaves, the sunbird is just one of many species that I have photographed in recent years and I would not have done so without my sprayer set-up.

My portable sprayer has enabled me to get images and video of the following species – Olive-backed Sunbird, Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, Wompoo Pigeon, Rose Robin, Pied Monarch, Lovely Fairy-wren, Fairy Gerygone and many more. Birds are sticky beaks! - And because of this inquisitive behaviour my sprayer setup works in three ways; it has movement created by the fine water droplets and the shine of the water droplets on the wet leaves, as well as the noise of the falling water droplets, making it just about impossible for birds to resist. The sprayer setup is easy to position, extremely portable, cost effective and does not rely on a town water supply with mains pressure.



Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove drinking from the wet leaves



Pied Monarch enticed by the water spray



A beautiful pair of Lovely Fairy-wrens posing for a perfect portrait

The overall sprayer/water hole system has enabled me to capture many bird images that are different to most bird images; water on the birds' feathers, birds holding out their wings to collect the spray and some birds hanging upside down to get the spray under their wings - most of the pigeon species will readily hold up a wing for the spray and it looks great in a print or digital image. I have shown this setup to other photographers,



A group of Macleay's Honeyeaters attracted to flower heads by the water spray often letting them use my hide and sprayer and now there are a number of photographers who have adopted the same type of setup. It makes for a set of images with quite a different perspective to the ones they already have in their collections.

In summary



I recommend that you try this sprayer setup as it is cheap, easy to use and it can be used anywhere with great results. Further, you don't need an expensive long lens, just sit in a hide and wait for the birds to come to you. I believe I capture better images of bush birds than most photographers with their long lenses as the birds are much closer to my camera sensor (that is, within five metres). I often place flowers and grasstrees at my artificial water hole and this makes for a great composition. The possibilities for your photography are as numerous as your imagination.

Crimson Finches enjoying a bath on a hot day

Bonus

Accompanying this handbook is a video containing a sequence of several bird species enjoying my simple yet proven sprayer set-up. I hope the video and digital images contained in this handbook inspire you to use my technique to capture your own unique images.

Best wishes,

Brian O'Leary

To see more of my wildlife photography go to:
www.brianolearyphotography.com and birdlifephotography.org.au



My campsite at Copeton Dam, NSW

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